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NSC FOR SINGH AND WATERS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: DINNER WITH DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS: FRUSTRATION,  
ANXIETY, AND HOPE

REF: A. 2006 CAIRO 3006

[1](#)B. 2006 CAIRO 6374

[1](#)C. CAIRO 1283

Classified By: Ambassador Francis J. Ricciardone, for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In a wide-ranging three-and-a-half hour-long August 15 dinner, a group of five leading Egyptian democracy activists told the Ambassador and Pol-Econ Minister-Counselor that Egypt's domestic "deterioration" across the board has resulted in increased frustration and anger on the part of the Egyptian citizenry. They advised that USG officials "speak to principles rather than personalities" when publicly commenting on issues relating to Egyptian political reform - "this way, you will not narrow the issues to one or two people, and the GOE cannot pervert your words." On presidential succession, the attendees agreed that the initial stages of the next president's rule, regardless of who he is, would present a brief but critical window of opportunity for change and reform on a variety of fronts. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) At an August 15 dinner hosted by poloff, the Ambassador and Pol-Econ Minister-Counselor discussed a broad range of political topics with five leading Egyptian political activists (strictly protect identities of all from premature declassification): Hisham El Bastawisi (the Court of Cassation justice who was one of the two judges at the center of the spring 2006 "Judges Crisis," and a vocal advocate for judicial independence, refs A and B), Hafez Abou Seida (Director of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights), Ghada Shahbender (head of "Shayfeenkum" or "We See You"), a civil society organization focused on elections monitoring and anti-corruption initiatives), Nasser Amin (Director, Arab Center for the Independence of the Judiciary and the Legal Profession), and Amr Choubaki (a senior political analyst at the venerable Al Ahram Center, and one of the founding members of the political movement "Kefaya").

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EGYPT IN DECLINE  
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[1](#)3. (C) All of the attendees opined that Egypt domestically is in a state of extreme "decline" and "deterioration," comparing unfavorably the provision of services, the government's disconnection from the population, the harsh measures of police and security services, and the costs of living today with 10-15 years ago, all of which feeds into a growing sense of frustration and anger on the part of the Egyptian citizenry. Choubaki asserted that, "even in the face of this, the regime is rotted out and extremely weak, due to its tremendous unpopularity, and total corruption ... what we have in Egypt is a balance of weakness rather than a

balance of power." The recent spate of labor strikes across Egypt (ref C) was cited by the participants as evidence of the increased willingness of Egyptians to confront the government in response to their grievances, with Choubaki noting, "We have not seen strikes like this in Egypt since the 1950's - this phenomenon is extremely telling." Bastawisi argued that, "in these circumstances, when there is no political outlet, and no hope on the part of citizens for fair elections, the risk of some type of violent outburst is greatly increased. In turn, this increases the likelihood of a military intervention, further setting back the prospects for democracy even after Mubarak leaves office."

14. (C) Nearly all also expressed concern about the government not allowing liberal political parties any "breathing space," thereby leaving the ruling National Democratic Party and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) as "the only players on the political field." However, Bastawisi asserted that, "we should not be scared of the Muslim Brotherhood," contending that "most Egyptians are moderate, middle-of-the-road people, and do not support the Islamists. The MB will not come to power in a fair election." Amin said that, "the MB is a smoke-bomb which the government tosses at the U.S. in order to keep you from pushing for real reforms."

15. (C) On the topic of Egypt's looming presidential succession, all agreed that the initial stages of the next president's rule, regardless of who he is, would present a brief but critical window of opportunity for change and reform on a variety of fronts. The attendees were in agreement as to the undesirability of presidential son Gamal Mubarak assuming the chief executive's chair, but were split as to whether such an outcome was becoming increasingly inevitable, or whether a military coup (either in the

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immediate aftermath of the death of Hosni Mubarak, or in the initial stages of a Gamal presidency) was more likely. Some observed that Gamal appears "increasingly assertive" in national policymaking, "in contrast with his father." None appeared to think that the MB would make an immediate move for the presidency in a succession scenario, as (according to Choubaki), "they can afford to wait, as they think that time is on their side." Abou Seida noted that, as soon as he heard the news that the president had died, he expected to rush to the streets, along with all other reform-minded Egyptians, to clamor for political change and freedoms. Amin laughingly replied that such an image was a pipe-dream, and that he expected that, upon the death of the president, the security services would immediately move to arrest the several hundred most active Egyptian reformers, in order to keep them from "trouble-making" at such a sensitive time. The consensus expectation was a scenario like that following Sadat's assassination - people would stay at home and anxiously await developments.

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SO WHAT DO YOU RECOMMEND?  
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16. (C) When queried as to his vision of how political reform can move forward, and how the USG can assist, Bastawisi advised that the U.S. "speak publicly to principles, not to personalities," noting for instance that rather than singling out Ayman Nour or Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the U.S. should address the broad principles of democracy, and freedom for political prisoners. "This way, you will not narrow the issues to one or two people, and the GOE cannot pervert your words." The other attendees met this suggestion with approval. Bastawisi repeatedly opined that the crux of political reform is free and fair elections, and the independence of the judiciary - "this is the only way forward for Egypt." Amin maintained that changing the restrictive Political Parties Law is the key to real political change. (Note: The Political Parties Law requires any aspiring Egyptian political party to get formally approved by an NDP-dominated committee before it can

legally compete in elections or register members. End note).

Shahbender insisted that one key step is for the U.S. to "stop giving Egypt aid," noting that, "AID makes you complicit in supporting this corrupt regime." The dinner ended on a relatively positive note, with all attendees noting that, despite the challenges faced by Egypt, they were "optimistic about the future." In its region, Egypt still was the country with the greatest advantages for the making of democracy.

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THE AFTERMATH  
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17. (C) The dinner received negative front-page coverage on August 18 in the new small-circulation Egyptian independent newspaper "Al Badeel" (The Alternative), edited by Al Ahram Center Deputy Director (and reputed Nasserist) Mohamed Sayed Said. We anticipate that there may be further negative media attention. In another indication of GOE concern about the event, a minivan was detected outside poloff's residence during the dinner, and the occupant was using a video camera to film the entrance to the building, and people entering and leaving. RSO has confirmed that the vehicle and its occupants were from State Security.  
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